

Sermon for the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost
 October 12, 2008
 Trinity Church

CHOSEN

You and I are belong to a chosen people. It has little to do with our own decisions, even if we may think it does. It has everything to do with God. In the words of Jesus, “You did not choose me. I chose you. “

So here we are, drawn toward the king’s wedding banquet. Some of us eager and hungry for the bread of life. Some of us wandering in by accident, as if it simply seemed like the thing to do. And some were dragged in against all of our instincts. But here we all are; each of us in some way chosen. That’s what the church is. It is the fellowship of those whom God has chosen. Who, then are the chosen?

Jesus’ story of the king’s wedding banquet raises more questions than it answers. What can you make of God, represented as a king who is by turns disappointed, frustrated, angry and in the end vindictive. And it all ends with that enigmatic summing up, “Many are called, but few are chosen.”

There are echoes here of the lesson from Exodus that was the Old Testament reading: God is angry to the point of wreaking utter destruction until Moses, quite cleverly, persuades God to change his mind. That’s the good news: God is the God who relents, and that may help us to understand the mind of Jesus.

But as I wrestle with this parable, Jesus’ baffling, confusing, disturbing parable, I come away with the sense that in Jesus mind, God’s chosen people are remarkably diverse and contradictory. It is description of the Church that would emerge. Its people have failures of courage and weaknesses of character. They also have remarkable and often unrecognized spiritual strength. They are obligated to love and serve the Lord; they are obligated to serve the common good with justice, mercy and humility; and they are to treat each other with the love that Christ has shown to them. They can also be mean and selfish. In short, they are human. And this, says Jesus, is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. It is the wedding banquet and a diverse humanity is invited. They are both good and bad, and at the end it is God who decides which is which.

It is God who chooses; and God’s wisdom and God’s logic that determines the choice. And to think of ones self as being among the elect can be dangerous if we presume to judge and imply that someone else not.

I am interested in the strange character in Jesus’ parable. The one who came without a wedding robe. The one who was unceremoniously dumped out into the street. It seems to violate all of our notions of tolerance and inclusiveness. What this strange detail does is to suggest that each of us has a sort of spiritual clothing,

unseen except to God and ourselves. We may appear to be clothed in virtue, but God sees the innermost depths of the character. Pretense and piety simply do not cover it -- and sometime or other every one of us has been there. I know I have.

John Wesley was once asked whom he expected to find in heaven. His answer was, "When I get to heaven there will be surprises: I will see some that I didn't expect to see there, and some that I expected to see there will be missing; but the biggest surprise of all would be that I am there!"

There is an entirely different way of thinking at work here, a different logic. Jesus is insisting that we look at God, at ourselves, and the world around us in a way that is entirely different from what we are brought up to believe is "common sense."

That has been happening all along as we look back at the series of Jesus' parables, the Gospel lesson we have heard these last few weeks. Things are turned upside down. Workers who were hired for an hour received the same wage as those who worked for a whole day. The crude and rejected rock becomes the cornerstone. We are to forgive out of all proportion to the offense. Thieves and prostitutes enter the Kingdom ahead of those who work hard at being righteous and religious. Our common sense notions of reward and punishment are turned inside out. Purity is a matter of the heart and not of conventionally expected behavior.

All sorts of efforts have been made to warp the mystery of the kingdom, the mystery of God's choosing, into our own accustomed frame of thought. Some have thought of it as gained by pious exercises and self-denial. Others have claimed that it is good works that win the reward. Martin Luther proclaimed a salvation by God's free grace as the response to faith, but then faith became belief: an agreement with certain propositions that are always beyond the grasp of the human mind. John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, came up with the curious doctrine of God's predestination. Only a French lawyer that Calvin was could have thought that one up!

The mystery of the Kingdom, the mystery of God's choice is the mystery of God himself. You have not chosen me. I have chosen you. That is the people of God. That is the Christ's Church. It takes all kinds, so the parable says to me. To try to make that church perfect, to root out the tares from the wheat, is to make it into a walled garden, shut off from the world that we are expected to serve in the name of Christ.

Instead, we are asked continually to subject ourselves to, not to what we insist is "common sense," but to the measurements of the Kingdom and the claims of God in this increasingly indifferent world that crowds in upon us. This is our God, our faith, our church. We did not choose it. In some mysterious way it chose us; but it does not make us "chosen" in a way that would exclude others, perhaps some very

unlikely others. And some of us will continue to say, “Why me?” In the long run it is whatever is at work in me, call it the Holy Spirit, that wants to make me recognize what ever is good and truthful and beautiful and holy wherever I see it. Those are the dimensions of eternal life.

It would also be a mistake to think that being chosen is an easy thing. For Moses and the prophets it wasn’t easy, and for Jesus it led to the cross. Likewise for ourselves, it involves responsibility. It involves work and sacrifice and sometimes the world’s contempt. But its reward is the crown of life.

Here’s a bit of Trinity Church history. When we had built the Parish Hall addition, I was asked to carve the signs that appear here and there, “Parlor,” Restroom,” and the like. When it came to the sign that appears over the hallway to this worship space, there was an argument. I preferred to have it read, “To the Nave.” The alternative opinion was that it should say, “To the Church.”

I lost the argument, but on balance that is a good thing. It is a good thing because each time our eyes happen to land on it, it says “Welcome to the church.” And it says that to everyone. It invites us to ask, not where is the church, but what is it. It is not an architectural space. It is the people, it is the communion, it is the King’s all-inclusive wedding banquet, it is the strange and wonderful company of saints across ages of ages. It is the body of Christ.

It is us.